

The Secret History of the War (Cont'd)

When The New York Times and The Washington Post resumed publication of the Pentagon papers last week, their substance was no longer electrifying. What passion was left had been expended in the dramatic court battle over publication. Instead, the continued documents now appeared as a sobering elaboration of known or suspected events, the fleshing out of a record increasingly dominated by a single theme.

Time and again, the record portrayed successive U.S. Administrations acting, almost without reassessment, on the conviction that to save South Vietnam from Communism was an overriding national interest. The commitment had arisen first from the intense anti-Communism of the early cold-war years—a time of emerging Communist challenge. Later, roughly at the transition from the Eisenhower to the Kennedy Administrations, it was justified in the conviction that the United States, as the world's greatest power, must never waver in fulfillment of its obligations. The first strategic rationale created the terms of the second. With occasional exceptions, American leaders looked back only to correct the techniques of failure, not to question the established goal. The result was escalation of U.S. involvement, at first slowly, then from 1965 to 1968, at a breakneck pace.

The newest disclosures spanned a generation in time, from Harry Truman's Administration to the late days of Lyndon Johnson's, and a kaleidoscopic cast of men enmeshed in what they only gradually came to realize was a tragic misad-

venture. The Truman-era papers revealed how early all the orthodoxies were framed and hardened—the notion of a U.S. stake in a non-Communist Vietnam and the “domino theory” of multiple disasters should Southeast Asia fall. Subsequent stories from the secret files detailed how John Kennedy gradually enlarged the U.S. commitment—the first irrevocable steps up the escalator—and how members of his Administration were in intimate touch with the Diem coup of 1963. Still others sketched the deepening descent into the quagmire in the Johnson years, the pained passage of Robert McNamara from hawk to unheeded dove and finally the turmoil set off by the shattering Tet offensive of 1968.

The Die Is Cast

The pattern was established early. Even before the Post and the Times resumed publication last week, The Christian Science Monitor reminded readers that the U.S. had repeatedly rejected appeals for aid from Vietnamese Communist leader Ho Chi Minh immediately after World War II. Drawing upon a part of the Pentagon study as well as the public record, the Monitor reported that Ho asked for the “same status as the Philippines.” Roughly translated, that meant an indefinite period of U.S. tutelage leading toward independence. The United States ignored eight direct approaches from Ho, according to the Pentagon analysts, in the first six months following the conclusion of World War II.

Rebuffed, Ho agreed in early 1946 to

the restoration of French power in Vietnam for five years. His oft-quoted explanation, as the Monitor paraphrased it, was that he “preferred to smell French excrement for five years rather than Chinese excrement for the rest of his life.” And the U.S., which had initially opposed the restoration of French colonialism, increasingly sided with France. Instead, suggests the study, the U.S. could have encouraged Ho as an “Asian Tito” and still protected European interests. But Washington was floundering for a policy. It needed France's goodwill in Europe, and ultimately that fact, plus the anti-Communist imperative, prevailed. “Keep in mind,” said a 1946 State Department cable to its man in Hanoi, “Ho's clear record as an agent international Communism. Least desirable eventuality would be establishment Communist-controlled Moscow-oriented state . . .”

Through the '40s, Washington remained ambivalent, however: despising Ho as a Communist, yet unable to confirm his ties to Moscow; pressing France to grant greater autonomy in Indochina, yet fretting at the risks of a Communist take-over. Mao Tse-tung's 1949 victory in China brought quick resolution. A National Security Council assessment of February 1950 could serve as a model for later language of involvement. “The extension of Communist authority in China represents a grievous political defeat for us,” it said. “If Southeast Asia also is swept by Communism we shall have suffered a major political rout, the repercussions of which will be felt throughout

The U.S. Commits Men

The Pentagon study dates the beginning of John Kennedy's deepening commitment in Vietnam to his decision of May 11, 1961, to send 500 military advisers to South Vietnam and to start clandestine warfare in the north. The President acted on a memorandum of the day before from the Joint Chiefs of Staff to Robert McNamara—a memo that distilled the consensus of most of JFK's advisers on the measures most urgently required and that shaped his course of action. They wrote:

... Assuming that the political decision is to hold Southeast Asia outside the Communist sphere, the Joint Chiefs of Staff are of the opinion that U.S. forces should be deployed immediately to South Vietnam; such action should be taken primarily to prevent the Vietnam



The Joint Chiefs, 1961: 'U.S. forces should be deployed'

ese from being subjected to the same situation as presently exists in Laos, which would then require deployment of U.S. forces into an already existing combat situation . . . Sufficient forces should be deployed to accomplish the following purposes: provide a visible deterrent to potential North Vietnam and/or Chinese Communist action; release Vietnamese forces from advanced and static defense positions to permit their fuller commitment

sist in training the Vietnamese forces to the maximum extent possible . . . indicate the firmness of our intent to all Asian nations . . .

To accomplish the foregoing, the Joint Chiefs of Staff recommend that: President Diem be encouraged to request that the United States fulfill its SEATO obligation, in view of the new threat now posed by the Laotian situation, by the immediate deployment of appropriate U.S. forces to South Vietnam.

TOLEDO, OHIO

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JUL 1 1977

Congress And The CIA

SEN. John Sherman Cooper has introduced legislation which would require the Central Intelligence Agency to make regular intelligence reports to Congress. Mr. Cooper's proposal has the support of Sens. J. W. Fulbright and Stuart Symington, and could well receive serious consideration in the Senate.

It is easy to sympathize with Mr. Cooper's motivation. The publication of the Pentagon papers has revealed that the CIA warned the Johnson administration that North Vietnam could not be defeated by bombing. Suppose these CIA analyses had been available to Congress as well? Might it not have been possible to bring enough pressure on the administration to have caused a change in policy?

Attractive as this possibility seems in retrospect, the fact remains that Mr. Cooper's plan is unworkable. The CIA is designed to collect and interpret important information about foreign powers for the use of the U. S. Government. The CIA simply cannot function out in the open; it must operate under conditions of strict secrecy.

On the other hand, a legislative body in a democratic government is naturally open and opposed to secrecy, or at least it should be. Congressmen can keep few secrets, and they should not put themselves into a situation where this is a necessity. The rough and tumble of competitive politics often compels congressmen to take public positions which, to say the least, are hardly compatible with intimate involvement in the clandestine operations of an undercover organization. In short, it is difficult to see how the CIA could report to Congress and remain an espionage agency.

All of which does not mean that Mr. Cooper and his colleagues have no recourse. The CIA now serves the executive branch of the Government, as it should. But the Constitution gives Congress a number of weapons which can be used against the White House. If congressmen feel that they are not getting all the information they need and are entitled to, the solution is to bring pressure on the president, not take over the CIA.